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KEEPING TRYST

A Tale of King Arthur's Time

"'Tis the king's call.' O list!
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Keep tryst—
Keep tryst or die!"

BY

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Keeping Tryst

NOW there was a troubadour in the kingdom of Arthur, who, strolling through the land with only his minstrelsy to win him a way, found in every baron's hall and cotter's hut a ready welcome. And while the boar's head sputtered on the spit, or the ale sparkled in the shining tankards, he told

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such tales of joust and journey, and feats of brave knight errantry, that even the scullions left their kitchen tasks, and, creeping near, stood round the door with mouths agape to listen.

Then with his harp-strings tuned to echoes of the wind on winter moors, he sang of death and valour on the field, of love and fealty in the hall, till those who listened forgot

all save his singing and the noble knights whereof he sang.

One winter night, as thus he carolled in a great earl's hall, a little page crept nearer to his bench beside the fire, and, with his blue eyes fixed in wonderment upon the graybeard's face, stood spell-bound. Now Ederyn was the page's name, an orphan lad whose lineage no man

knew, but that he came of gentle blood all eyes could see, although as vassal 'twas his lot to wait upon the great earl's squire.

It was the Yule-tide, and the wassail-bowl passed round till boisterous mirth drowned oftentimes the minstrel's song, but Ederyn missed no word. Scarce knowing what he did, he crept so close he found him-

self with upturned face against the old man's knee.

"How now, thou flaxen-haired," the minstrel said, with kindly smile. "Dost like my song?"

"Oh, sire," the youth made answer, "methinks on such a wing the soul could well take flight to Paradise. But tell me, prithee, is it possible for such as *I* to gain the title of a knight? How doth

one win such honours and acclaim and reach the high estate that thou dost laud?"

The minstrel gazed a little space into the Yule log's flame, and stroked his long hoar beard. Then made he answer:

"Some win their spurs and earn the royal accolade because the blood of dragons stains their hands. From mighty combat with these

terrors they come victorious to their king's reward. And some there be sore scarred with conquest of the giants that ever prey upon the borders of our fair domain. Some, who have gone on far crusades to alien lands, and there with heart of gold and iron hand have proved their fealty to the Crown."

Then Ederyn sighed, for well he knew his stripling

form could never wage fierce combat with a dragon. His hands could never meet the brawny grip of giants. "Is there no other way?" he faltered.

"I wot not," was the answer. "But take an old man's counsel. Forget thy dreams of glory, and be content to serve thy squire. For what hast such as thou to do with great ambitions?

They'd prove but flames to burn away thy daily peace."

With that he turned to quaff the proffered bowl and add his voice to those whose mirth already shook the rafters. Nor had he any further speech with Ederyn. But afterward the pretty lad was often in his thoughts, and in his wanderings about the land he mused upon the question he had asked.

Another twelvemonth sped its way, and once again the Yule log burned within the hall, and once again the troubadour knocked at the gate, all in the night and falling snow. And as before, with merry jests they led him in and made him welcome. And as before, was every mouth agape from squire's to scullion's, as he sang.

Once more he sang of knights and ladyes fair, of love and death and valour; and Ederyn, the page, crept nearer to him till the harp-strings ceased to thrill. With head upon his hands, he sat and sighed. Not even when the wassail-bowl was passed with mirth and laughter did he look up. And when the graybeard minstrel saw his grief, he thought upon his

question of the Yule-tide gone.

"Ah, now, thou flaxen-haired," he whispered in his ear. "I bear thee tidings which should make thee sing for joy. There *is* a way for even such as thou to win the honours thou dost covet. I heard it in the royal court when last I sang there at the king's behest."

Then all aquiver with his

eagerness did Ederyn kneel, with face alight, beside the minstrel's knee to hear.

"Know this," began the graybeard. "'Tis the king's desire to 'stablish round him at his court a chosen circle whose fidelity hath stood the utmost test. Not deeds of prowess are required of these true followers, with no great conquests doth he tax them, but they must prove them-

selves trustworthy, until on hand and heart it may be graven large, '*In all things faithful.*'

"To Merlin, the enchanter, he hath left the choice, who by some strange spell I wot not of will send an eerie call through all the kingdom. And only those will hear who wake at dawn to listen in high places. And only those will heed who keep

the compass needles of their souls true to the north star of a great ambition. The time of testing will be long, the summons many. To duty and to sorrow, to disappointment and defeat, thou may'st be called. No matter what the tryst, there is but one reply if thou wouldst win thy knighthood. Give heed and I will teach thee now that answer."

Then smiting on his harp, the minstrel sang, so softly under cover of the noise, that only Ederyn heard. Through all the song ran ever this refrain. It seemed a brooklet winding in and out through some fair meadow:

"'Tis the king's call. O list!
Thou heart and hand of mine, keep tryst —
Keep tryst or die!"

Then Ederyn, with his hand upon his heart, made

solemn oath. "Awake at dawn and listening in high places will I await that call. With the compass needle of my soul true to the north star of a great ambition will I follow where it leads, and though through fire and flood it take me, I'll make but this reply:

"'Tis the king's call. O list!
Thou heart and hand of mine, keep tryst —
Keep tryst or die!'"

Pressing the old man's hand in gratitude (he could say no word for the strangefulness in his throat that well-nigh choked him), he rose from his knees and left the hall to muse on what had passed.

That night he climbed into the tower, and, with his face turned to the east, kept vigil all alone. Below, the rioters waxed louder in their mirth.

The knife was in the meat, the drink was in the horn. But he would not join their revels, lest morning find him sunk in sodden sleep, heavy with feasting and witless from wine.

As gray dawn trailed across the hills, he started to his feet, for far away sounded the call for which he had been waiting. It was like the faint blowing of

an elfin horn, but the words came clearly.

"Ederyn! Ederyn! One awaits thee at nightfall in the shade of the yew-tree by the abbey tower! Keep tryst!"

Now the abbey tower was the space of forty furlongs from the domain of the earl, and full well Ederyn knew that only by especial favour of his squire could he gain

leave of absence for this jaunt. So, from sunrise until dusk, he worked with will, to gain the wished-for leave. Never before did buckles shine as did the buckles of the squire entrusted to his polishing. Never did menial tasks cease sooner to be drudgery, because of the good-will with which he worked. And when the day was done, so well had every

duty been performed, right willingly the squire did grant him grace, and forthwith Ederyn sped upon his mission.

The way was long, and, when he reached the abbey tree, he fell a-trembling, for there a tall wraith stood within the shadows of the yew. No face had it that he could see, its hands no substance, but he met it

bravely, saying: "I am Ederyn, come to keep the king's tryst."

And then the spectre's voice replied: "Well hast thou kept it, for 'tis known to me the many menial tasks thou didst perform ere thou couldst come upon thy quest. In token that we two have met, here is my pledge that thou may'st keep to show the king."

He felt a light touch on the bosom of his inner vestment, and suddenly he stood alone beside the gruesome abbey. Clammy with fear, he knew not why, he drew his mantle round him and sped home as one speeds in a fearsome dream. And that it was a dream he half-believed, when later, in the hall, he served at meat those gathered round the old earl's

board. But when he sought his bed, and threw aside his outer garment, there on his coarse, rough shirt of hodden gray a pearl gleamed white above his heart, where the wraith's cold hand had touched him. It was the token to the king that he had answered faithfully his call.

Again before the dawn he climbed into the tower, and,

listening when the voices of the world were still, heard clear and sweet, like far-blown elfin horn, another summons.

"Ederyn! Ederyn! One awaits thee at the midnight hour beside black Kilgore's water. Keep tryst!"

Again to gain his squire's permission he toiled with double care. This time his task was counting all the

spears and halberds, the battle-axes and the coats of mail that filled the earl's great armament. And o'er and o'er he counted, keeping careful tally with a bit of keel upon the iron-banded door, till the red lines that he marked there made his eyes ache and his head swim. At last the task was finished, and so well the squire praised him, and for his faithfulness

again was fain to speed him on his way.

It was a woful journey to the waters of Kilgore. Sleep weighed on Ederyn's eyelids, and haltingly he went the weary miles, footsore and worn. But midnight found him on the spot where one awaited him, another wraith-like envoy of the king, and it, too, left a touch upon his heart in token he had kept

the tryst. And when he looked, another pearl gleamed there beside the first.

So many a day went by, and Ederyn failed not in his homely tasks, but carried to his common round of duties all his might, as if they were great feats of prowess. Thus gained he liberty to keep the tryst with every messenger the king did send.

Once he fared forth along

a dangerous road that led he knew not where, and, when he found it crossed a loathly swamp all filled with slime and creeping things, fain would he have fled. But, pushing on for sake of his brave oath, although with fainting heart, he reached the goal at last. This time his token made him wonder much. For when he wakened from his swoon, a shin-

ing star lay on his heart above the pearls.

Now it fell out the squire to whom this Ederyn was page was killed in conflict with a robber band, and Ederyn, for his faithfulness, was taken by the earl to fill that squire's place. Soon after that, they left the hall, and journeyed on a visit to a distant lord. 'Twas to the Castle of Content they came,

where was a joyous garden. And now no menial tasks employed the new squire's time. Here was he free to wander all the day through vistas of the joyous garden, or loiter by the fountain in the courtyard and watch the maidens at their tasks, having fair speech with them among the flowers. And one there was among them, so lily-like in face, so gentle-

voiced and fair, that Ederyn well-nigh forgot his oath, and felt full glad when for a space the king's call ceased to sound. And gladder was he still, when, later on, the earl's long visit done, he left young Ederyn behind to serve the great lord of the castle, for so the two friends had agreed, since Ederyn had pleased the old lord's fancy.

Yet was he faithful to his

vow, and failed not every dawn to mount to some high place, when all the voices of the world were still, and listen for the sound of Merlin's horn. One morn it came:

"Ederyn! Ederyn! One waits thee far away. By the black cave of Atropos, when the moon fulls, keep thy tryst!"

Now 'twas a seven days' journey to that cave, and

Ederyn, thinking of the lily maid, was loath to leave the garden. He lingered by the fountain until nightfall, saying to himself: "Why should I go on longer in these foolish quests, keeping tryst with shadows that vanish at the touch? No nearer am I to a knight's estate than when, a stripling page, I listened to the minstrel's tales."

The fountain softly

splashed within the garden. From out the banquet-hall there stole the sound of tinkling lutes, and then the lily maiden sang. Her siren voice filled all his heart, and he forgot his oath to duty. But presently a star reflected in the fountain made him look up into the jewelled sky, where shone the polar constellation. And there he read the oath he had forgot-

ten: "With the compass needle of my soul true to the north star of my great ambition, I will follow where it leads."

Thrusting his fingers in his ears to silence the beloved voice of her who sang, he madly rushed from out the garden into the blackness of the night. The Castle of Content clanged its great gate behind him. He shiv-

ered as he felt the jar through all his frame, but, never taking out his fingers, on he ran, till scores of furlongs lay between him and the tempting of that siren voice.

It was a strange and fearsome wood that lay between him and the cave. All things seemed moaning and afraid. He saw no forms, but everywhere the shadows shuddered, and moans and groans

pursued him till nameless fears clutched at his heart with icy chill. Then suddenly the earth slipped way beneath his feet, and cold waves closed above his head. He knew now he had fallen in the pool that lies upon the far edge of the fearsome wood, — a pool so deep and of such whirling motion that only by the fiercest struggle may one escape. Gladly he

would have allowed the waters to close over him, such cold pains smote his heart, had he not seemed to hear the old minstrel's song. It aroused him to a final effort, and he gasped between his teeth:

"'Tis the king's call! O list!
Thou heart and hand of mine, keep tryst —
Keep tryst or die!'"

With that, in one mighty struggle he dragged himself

to land. A bow-shot farther on he saw the cave, and by sheer force of will crept toward it. What happened then he knew not till the moon rose full and high above him. A form swathed all in black bowed over him.

"Ederyn," she sighed, "here is thy token that the king may know that thou hast met me face to face."

He thought it was a dia-

mond at first, that sparkled there beside the star, but when he looked again, lo, nothing but a tear.

Then went he back unto the joyous garden by slow degrees, for he was now sore spent. And after that the summons came full often. Whenever all the world seemed loveliest and life most sweet, then was the call most sure to come. But

never once he faltered. Never was he faithless to the king's behest. Up weary mountain steps he toiled to find the sombre face of Disappointment there in waiting, and Suffering and Pain were often at his journey's end, and once a sore Defeat. But bravely as the months went by he learned to smile into their eyes, no matter which one handed out to him

the pledge of Duty well performed.

One day, when he no longer was a beardless youth, but grown to pleasing stature and of great brawn, he heard the hoped-for call of which he long had dreamed: "Ederyn! Ederyn! The king himself awaits thee. Midsummer morn at lark-song, keep tryst beside the palace gate."

As travellers on the desert, spent and worn, see far across the sand the palm-tree's green that marks life-giving wells, so Ederyn hailed this summons to the king. The soul-consuming thirst that long had urged him on grew fiercer as the well of consummation came in sight. Hope shod his feet with wings, as thus with every nerve a-strain he

pushed toward the final tryst. So fearful was he some mishap might snatch the cup away ere it had touched his thirsty lips, that three full days before the time he reached the Vale of Avalon, and sat him down outside the entrance to the palace.

Now there came prowling through the wood that edged the fair domain the gnarled

dwarfs that do the will of Shudderwain. And Shudderwain, of all the giants thereabouts, most cruel was and to be feared. Knowing full well what pleasure it would give the bloody monster, these dwarfs laid evil hands on Ederyn. Sleeping they found him, and bound him with hard leathern thongs, and then with gibes and impish laughter dragged

him into a dungeon past the help of man.

Two days and nights he lay there, raging at fate and at his helplessness, till he was well-nigh mad, bethinking him of all his baffled hopes. And like a madman gnawed he on the leathern thongs till he was free, and beat his hands against the stubborn rock that would not yield, and threw himself

against the walls that held him in.

The dwarfs from time to time peered through the slatted window overhead and mocked him, pointing with their crooked thumbs.

"Ha! ha! Thou'lt keep no tryst," they chattered. "But if thou'lt swear upon thy oath to go back to the joyous garden, and hark no more for Merlin's call, we'll

let thee loose from out this Dungeon of thy Disappointment."

Then was Ederyn tempted, for the dungeon was foul indeed, and his heart cried out to go back to the lily maiden. But once more in his ears he thrust his fingers and cried:

"'To the king's call alone I'll list!
Oh, heart and hand of mine, keep tryst —
Keep tryst or die!'"

On the third night, with

the quiet of despair he threw him prone upon the dungeon floor and held his peace, no longer gnawing on his thongs or beating on the rock. A single moonbeam straggled through the slatted window, and by its light he saw a spider spinning out a web. Then, looking dully around, he saw the dungeon was hung thick with other webs, foul with the dust of years.

Great festoons of the cobweb film shrouded his prison walls. As up and down the hairy creature swung itself upon its thread, the hopeless eyes of Ederyn followed it.

All in a twinkling he saw how he might profit by the spider's teaching, and clapped his hand across his mouth to keep from shouting out his joy so that the dwarfs could hear. Now once more

like a madman rushing at the walls, he tore down all the dusty webs, and twisted them together in long strands. These strands he braided in thick ropes and tied them, knotting them and twisting and doubling once again. All the while he kept bewailing the stupid way in which he wasted time. "Three days ago I might have quit this den," he

sighed, "had I but used the means that lay at hand. Full well I knew that heaven always finds a way to help the man who helps himself. No creature lives too mean to be of service, and even dungeon walls must harbour help for him who boldly grasps the first thing that he sees and makes it serve him."

So fast and furiously he worked that, long before the

moonbeam faded, his cobweb rope was strong enough to bear his weight, and long enough to reach twice over to the slatted window overhead. By many trials he at last succeeded in throwing it around a spike that barred the window, and, climbing up, he forced the slats apart and clambered through. Then tying the rope's end to the window, he slid down

all the dizzy cliffside in which the dwarfs had dug the dungeon, and dropped into the stream that ran below.

Lo, when he looked around him it was dawn. Midsummer morn it was, and, plunging through the wood, he heard the lark's song rise, and reached the palace gate just as it opened to the blare of trumpets for the king's

train to ride forth. When Ederyn saw the royal cavalcade, he shrunk back into the wayside bushes, so ill-befitting did it seem that he should come before the king in tattered garments, with blood upon his hands where the sharp rocks had cut, and with foul dungeon stains.

But that the king might know he'd ever proven faithful, he sank upon his knees

and bared his breast at his approach. There all the pledges glistened in the sunlight, in rainbow hues. There Pain had dropped her heart's blood in a glittering ruby, and Honour set her seal upon him in a golden star. A diamond gleamed where Sorrow's tear had fallen, and amethysts glowed now with purple splendour to mark his patient meeting with Defeat.

But mostly were the pledges little pearls for little duties faithfully performed; and there they shone, and, as the people gazed, they saw the jewels take the shape of letters, so that the king read out before them all, "*Semper fidelis.*"

Then drew the king his royal sword and lightly smote on Ederyn's shoulder, and cried: "Arise, Sir

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Knight, Sir Ederyn the Trusty. Since I may trust thee to the utmost in little things as well as great, since thou of all men art most worthy, henceforth by thy king's heart thou shalt ride, ever to be his faithful guard and comrade."

So there before them all he did him honour, and ordered that a prancing steed be brought and a

good sword buckled on his side.

Thus Ederyn won his sovereign's favour. Soon, by his sovereign's grace permitted, he went back to the joyous garden to woo the lily maiden. When he had won his bride and borne her to the palace, then was his great reward complete for all his years of fealty to his vow. Then out into the

world he went to guard his king. Henceforth blazoned on his shield and helmet he bore the crest — a heart with hand that grasped a spear, and, underneath, these words:

"*I keep the tryst!*"

THE END.